DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 278 011 CS 210 165

AUTHOR	Dixon, John; Stratta, Leslie
TITLE	Examining Poetry--The Need for Change. Response to Literature. Booklet 2.
INSTITUTION	Southern Regional Examinations Board, Southampton (England).
PUB DATE	86
NOTE	67p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Southern Regional Examinations Board, Avondale House, 33 Carlton Crescent, Southampton, S09 4YL England, United Kingdom (35 pence).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Educational Change; Educational Improvement; *Educational Innovation; Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; Feedback; Foreign Countries; Guidelines; Ideology; *Literary Criticism; Literary Devices; *Literature Appreciation; Modernization; *Poetry; Reader Response; Reading Comprehension; Secondary Education; Test Construction; Test Format; Test Interpretation; Test Reliability
IDENTIFIERS	*Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

Elaborated as a response to a traditional set of secondary school poetry examinations that are called "sterile and outmoded," this report resulted from a series of seminars held in England by literature educators. The report offers extensive guidelines for modernizing the exams, examples of student critical writing about particular poems, and student responses to the educators' modernization plans. Part 1, "Exploring Possible Achievements," assesses the efficacy of current exam guidelines, offering concrete examples using student comments on several poems. Part 2, "Experimenting with Guidelines," discusses strategies for the improvement of the guidelines, such as changing the wording or offering alternate sets of guidelines for different students. Part 3, "Ideological Issues: A Further Experiment," considers a particularly complex question, ideology, and focuses on the most accessible use of the concept--consciously committed poetry, and especially satirical criticism and protest about political and social mores. Part 4, "Questions on Poetry Anthologies," argues against exam questions that generalize about poetic texts and for a less rigid system which would enlist the collaboration of the students and allow for a more independent response. (NKA)

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RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

Booklet 2.

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EXAMINING POETRY - THE NEED FOR CHANGE

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by

John Dixon
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Introduction

Primarily, poetry is meant to be enjoyed - to be returned to and savoured. In reading a poem for enjoyment, we enter an imaginary world which we find emotionally and intellectually compelling. So the overriding question about any teaching of poetry is: does it lead our students to want to go on reading and entering those imaginary worlds - for their own satisfaction? This, then, ought to be the primary criterion for judging both the courses and the exams for the whole age group at 16+.

Our traditional examinations assume that the only evidence for response comes from writing. It's a very odd view. (It derives, we take it, from the unconscious model of the university, where less than 1% of any age group reads and studies literature - from a highly specialist interest.) What is even more peculiar, the predominant form of writing presupposed is "literary critical" - for want of a better term. The way students read and present poems orally, the way they talk about them reflectively, the poems they write in response .... these and many other forms of evidence have been neglected in the past and must now be considered.

But the tradition most teachers have been brought up in goes deeper. Much of the time the questions about poetry, as we shall show, treat it as quasi-objective knowledge, as non-problematic and, often, inert. We believe this is the result of a basic confusion. On the one hand, there is a printed "text" there on the page in front of us. We can look up the words in dictionaries and historical references in the footnotes; we can spell out rhyme schemes and spot metaphors. Not all of this is fruitless, although much of it often remains as inert knowledge. On the other hand, there is the "poem", the imaginary experience that goes on in

the mind as we read with empathy and understanding. Unless we are creating an imaginary and compelling experience as we read, and reliving it as we write, we have only inert knowledge to draw on. This experience is essentially personal - even though each one of us starts (and returns to) the same printed text. (1)

It can never be objective, as we shall show, whatever exam questions may imply.

Can questions (or prompts) be designed that actually assist the writer to create the imaginary experience, the poem, while fully taking account of what's there in the text? This booklet reports the results of our seminar group's attempts to find an answer.

We look forward to many more experiments.

* * *

PART I.

Exploring possible achievements

We began our study by asking ourselves what kinds of positive achievement we might expect from good examples of coursework or exam scripts. So far as we know there has been no systematic effort to answer this question - though it is fundamental to 16+ assessment. We began our seminars, therefore, by trying to get some benchmarks, beginning with pieces of coursework and moving on to exam "answers".

The first piece comes from an SREB folder; we give first the poem and then the student's response.

* * *

NINETIETH BIRTHDAY

You go up the long track
That will take a car, but is best walked
On slow foot, noting the lichen
That writes history on the page
Of the grey rock. Trees are about you
At first, but yield to the green bracken,
The nightjar's house : you can hear it spin
On warm evenings; it is still now
In the noonday heat, only the lesser
Voices sound, blue-fly and gnat
And the stream's whisper. As the road climbs,
You will pause for breath and the far sea's
Signal will flash, till you turn again
To the steep track, buttressed with cloud.

And there at the top that old woman,
Born almost a century back
In that stone farm, awaits your coming;
Waits for the news of the lost village
She thinks she knows, a place that exists
In her memory only.

You bring her greeting
And praise for having lasted so long
With time's knife shaving the bone.
Yet no bridge joins her own
World with yours, all you can do
Is lean kindly across the abyss
To hear words that were once wise.

R.S. Thomas.

* * *

'NINETIETH BIRTHDAY'

If you were to drive up the track, you would miss many sights and sounds. You would drive up to the house with such speed that you wouldn't notice the trees that 'yield to the green bracken', 'the nightjar's house' and because you wouldn't need to stop to regain your breath you'd miss seeing the sea in the distance. You'd miss the sounds of the blue-flies and the gnats 'and the stream's whisper'. Other reasons for walking on foot, apart from wanting to take in the wonderful sounds, could be to give one time to prepare oneself to face what is at the top of the hill 'Noting the lichen that writes history on the page of the grey rock' suggests that each plant that has grown has been there for many years and is now still the same as it was when it grew there. I feel that this is suggesting that this is a similar sort of situation to what you will find when you reach the top of the hill. The words 'Buttressed with cloud' gives the impression that all the top of the hill was surrounded by cloud. This gives us a mystical feeling and makes one think that perhaps beyond that cloud there is a different world or a different time. Prehaps then the slow walk is [to] give us the chance to pluck up the courage to walk through the cloud.

I believe that the poet has used so many lines to describe the journey up to the 'stone farm' because he wants to prepare the reader for what is to come. I also believe he wants to give us a feeling of peace and tranquility and everlasting time. Everything he mentions is either beautiful and peaceful or they are slow and time taking. I think he is giving you a taste of things that don't change before mentioning the old lady.

'Born almost a century back' enforces the fact that she is very old. Because she is so old I believe that she would be very frail. The fact that she is small, skinny and frail is also present in the line 'with time's knife shaving the bone'. I believe she is isolated and doesn't go down to the village often. 'She thinks she knows a place that exists only in her mind'. This show that she remembers the village as it was when she was young, but not [how] it has changed with the time, though she is unaware of ware of this. 'Awaits for news of a lost village' suggests that she does not have much to do and is content to wait until your next visit to her to hear news of the village. It also gives the impression to me that she does not really wish to know of the village, but merely enjoys the company she receives when you arrive.

I think that the gulf there is between Thomas the the [and the] old woman is simply the generation gap. The things that she believes and the things that he believes are so different. Their ways of life clash. The old woman is still living in an age gone by and now that the times have changed doesn't really fit in with the modern world. Tomas is very much a part of the modern world and times have changed drastically since the time when the old woman was young. He makes you feel the width of this gulf by saying that all you can do is 'lean kindy across the abyss', you must take yourself back to her world and be friendly towards her. 'Hear words that were once wise' suggests

that she may have been very intelligent and good at giving advice many years ago, but now her advice is no good to anyone. 'Yet no bridge joins her own world with yours' this show that their two ways of life are completely different and how ever hard you try they will never mix.

Things in the poem that have particularly interested me are 'praise for having lasted so long'. It would seem much nicer to me to greet her on her birthday as one would anyone else. Greeting her in this way surely would make her feel very old (even older than she already is). 'That stone farm' shows just how old the old woman property is, it gives me a very cold feeling though.

This poem leaves me feeling sad; the thought of the old woman, isolated at the top of the hill. Sat in her icy home waiting for visitors. The fact that she has lost touch with the way of life of the time she is living in, so doesn't enjoy herself much. She just sits there year after year getting older, receiving 'praise for having lasted so long' simply sat there awaiting her next birthday.

Shauna.

* * *

This poem is not dramatic; it seems to meditate on the experience and obliquely to indicate what the experience signifies. It is quite undemonstrative. How has the writer helped herself - what strategy has she found - to move into this delicately evoked world?

Her first impulse is to help herself realise what you might miss "if you were to drive up the track" and not follow in the poet's footsteps. Thus she does indeed

register key images as she imagines the walk up; and in so doing "walks her reader into the poem", as the seminar noted. At the same time, perhaps, she begins to realise that the walk "could be to give one time to prepare oneself to face what is at the top of the hill". So by placing herself imaginatively in the world of the walker, she has raised the question: what's going on in his mind? - what's the human significance? Her answer moves her to dwell on the meaning of the hill, "buttressed with cloud", and the mystical feeling she now has that "perhaps beyond ... is a different world or a different time".

The precise meaning of that walk is necessarily problematic: the poem - as often with lyric - doesn't spell it out but speaks in images. Her tentativeness echoes this; but it is right, we suggest, to explore the ambiguities of feeling, as the student goes on to do, and to say what "I believe" - how she construes the feelings and thoughts that walk is imbued with. She can only do so because the "poem" is imaginatively real; she has got beyond the "text" on the page.

When the top is reached, the language of the "text" changes; the student realises she has to work through the implications of each elliptical or figurative expression if she is to understand the world of the aged woman. Thus, again, she builds beyond the literal: "I believe that she would be very frail ... I believe she is isolated .... she remembers the village as it was when she was young... content to wait until your next visit...." All of this is evidence of empathic penetration into a human world that is almost certainly alien to a young woman (not to mention the poet).

After this she turns and invites herself to reflect on the "poem" as a whole. She takes issue (as the poet wants her to) with the customary "praise for having lasted so long". If she misses the implication of senility, we must consider the possible limits to her real-life experience - which is what she has to

build on. The poet's final feelings perhaps are self-depreciating and uncomforting: "All you can do / Is lean kindly across the abyss". The student, however, is still focussing on the old woman, so the poem "leaves me feeling sad... she has lost touch with the way of life... she just sits there year after year getting older..." It is a partial response, but an important and valuable achievement, we believe.

Challenges that poetry presents

When poetry appears in the English classroom, as often as not it will be in lyric form (as here) - certainly up to the age of 16. It might help us to appreciate this student's achievements more fully if we think for a moment about some of the characteristic difficulties lyric presents the young reader with:

- "settings" and images of the surroundings often work at a symbolic level as well as the literal;
- feelings and shifts of mood can often be conveyed obliquely;
- ideas are often expressed in compressed form ("Waits for the news of the lost village / She thinks she knows");
- the kind of experience being presented by a mature writer may lie well outside the average teenager's world;
- the way the experience is perceived (through a "presenting consciousness") may be complex and ambivalent (2).

We believe all of these difficulties are present in "Ninetieth Birthday"! Besides, the poem makes no dramatic appeal to a youngster; it works in a low

key rather, ruminating with an edge of self-doubt perhaps.

We can well imagine, therefore, that Shauna has benefited from an enabling teacher, with valuable prompts about the kinds of strategy that might help. For instance:

- telling the story as if you were present is an important way for a young writer to get an imaginative grasp of the events (or the scene), from the inside, as it were;

- standing aside from the narrative to tease out implications of images and compressed expressions is an important additional strategy, provided all the time you are actively constructing a person or scene in your imagination (as here);

- it is helpful to realise and acknowledge that at times you are having to move beyond the text in your construction, picking up resonances in the images or rhythms and building out from them, while remaining tentative ("gives the impression to me");

- it is also worth asking yourself what (ideological) point of view is being suggested by the poet and whether you are sympathising fully with it.

Shauna has learnt to use each of these strategies - and with some assurance. It's only on the last one that the difficulties have still to be surmounted.

Evidence from an examination

We imagine that Shauna has probably had the opportunity to hear the poem well read, to read it over herself more than once, to discuss and feel her way into it,

listening to the impressions it has made on other people, and has had the benefit of some thoughtful prompts from her teacher. This is what good coursework makes possible. Obviously, by comparison, examinations put students at a considerable disadvantage. All an examiner can offer is the poem (often unseen) and some "questions".

Looking back, we can now see that the demand for the examiner to find exactly the right kinds of "questions" or guidelines for all students is well nigh asking the impossible. It was not surprising, then, that in the first sample of exam scripts we read through, the latter showed nothing comparable to Shauna's piece - indeed the typical questions on an unseen poem are sufficient in themselves to rule out anything of that quality.

However, through Jane Ogborn our seminar group became aware of the experimental approaches being carried out by teachers and examiners under the aegis of the Cambridge "Plain Text" syllabus. The way the students were addressed, and what was said in the "prompts" or "guidelines" (as we began to call them), seemed to offer a new philosophy in examining. We studied the following example with increasing interest:

> *"Read the following poem a number of times, till you feel you have begun to get inside it; then look at the questions printed below it, which are intended to help you to express freely your own reactions to the poem".*

INCENDIARY

That one small boy with a face like pallid cheese
And burnt-out little eyes could make a blaze
As brazen, fierce and huge, as red and gold
And zany yellow as the one that spoiled
Three thousand guineas' worth of property
And crops at Godwin's farm on Saturday
Is frightening - as fact and metaphor:

An ordinary match intended for
The lighting of a pipe or kitchen fire
Misused may set a whole menagerie
Of flame-fanged tigers roaring hungrily.
And frightening too, that one small boy should set
The sky on fire and choke the stars to heat
Such skinny limbs and such a little heart
Which would have been content with one warm kiss
Had there been anyone to offer this.

Vernon Scannell.

"This poem is about a small boy and a fire that he started deliberately. What impression of the fire does the poem create for you? Mention some of the details in the poem that contribute to this impression.

Write about your impression of the small boy and the feeling towards him that the poem arouses. How far does the poem enable you to understand why he started the fire?

The poet repeats the word 'frightening'. What things frighten him about this incident? Do you find that 'frightening' is the strongest, or the final, feeling that the poem expresses for you?"

* * *

We began by considering the opening rubric: "re-read the following ... to get inside it ... your own reactions to the poem". We felt that this was helpful to students, especially the idea of getting inside the poem as they read. However, we had reservations about the word "questions": was it too restricting? - would it suggest a type of exercise, requiring a special "examination" style of writing? (We thought of alternatives, perhaps something less than questions, which might leave more control in the student's hands: "handholds, guidelines, suggestions,

issues, prompts, starting-points, springboards...." We shall look at these later.) The idea of "(questions) ... which are intended to help you to express freely your own reactions" was along the right lines, however.

The guidelines that follow the poem suggest a strategy:

- focus on your "impression of the fire" (an invitation to describe, evoke and even interpret);

- move to "your impression of the small boy" and your "feeling towards him" (allowing empathy - or revulsion - to emerge);

- consider the "final" feeling you are left with by "this incident"(reviewing the poem as a whole, perhaps, and the poet's attitudes too).

This strategy seemed to offer students a chance to explore and expand on "impressions". In places we had reservations about the language, admittedly. "Write about your impressions of the small boy" was simple and direct; by comparison "how far does the poem enable you to understand" and "the feeling ... that the poem arouses" sounded like a minor reversion to the special register that "dignifies the examiner's art"! However, the overriding intention "to help you ... express feeling" did leave it open to students to treat these as suggestions, if they so wished.

Would these guidelines have the desired effect, then, for students who would be at many different developmental staging points both as readers of poetry and as writers? With the kind assistance of the Cambridge board and Jane Ogborn, who made available a set of scripts, we looked closely at some examples. The two that we have selected here seem to represent positive achievements at rather different staging

points. Here is the first:

The poem gives the impression that the fire were great and it had spread all over the farm, its flames spread quickly, as quickly has a tiger hungrily coming towards you, the noise of the fire was as deafening as the roar of a tiger whilst tearing flesh. The brightness of the red and gold flames made the sky look red and fierce, and as persons chocked, you could imagine the stars up in the sky being chocked by the thick black smoke rising into the sky.

My impressions of the small boy are that he was lonely and needed some attention just to tell him that he was still loved. All he wanted was just one warm kiss which would make him content, but there was no one in the world who would offer him this. The last two lines of the poem "He would have been content with one warm kiss had there been anyone to offer this", made me feel sorrowful for the child. I wanted to reach out, pull him close and give him the one warm kiss that he so much wanted, which no one would give him. The small boy may have started the fire to arouse attention towards him because no one ever seemed to notice him, but still they didn't. They thought that the lighting of a pipe or kitchen fire caused the farm to blaze.

The things which frightened me in the incident were that of the "brazen, fierce and huge, as red and gold and zany yellow" was the most frightening part of the fire because of its deep descriptive words, which also gave the feeling inside you.

"Flame-fanged tigers roaring hungrily", is a good line because it described how the fire spread and has the flames grabbed and reached anything in its reach. The final feeling which the poem express to me is that of the boy who still wanted that one warm kiss and after the fire he still didn't have anyone offer him this. The fire wasn't very appealing to me in the poem only the little boy stuck in my mind after

reading it because all the trouble of the fire had built up then there was the boy who I could imagine in his blue shorts and braces standing there watching everyone show attention to the fire and not him.

Janice.

* * *

There is a willing reliance on the guidelines here, even their wording being incorporated:

- The poem gives the impression that the fire..
- My impressions of the small boy are...
- The things which frightened me (sic) in the incident were...

Nevertheless, these starting points seem to have released and encouraged a very personal response.

Right from the start Janice catches the animal power of the fire, "as deafening as the roar of a tiger whilst tearing flesh". As she explores the image of the tiger, redrafting at one point ("and roaring"), she realises more of its potential, on the wing as it were. This carries her visually into the scene and she imagines "the thick black smoke rising into the sky" - and appropriately extends this to bystanders being choked.

As she turns to the boy she is moved by his plight, expressing her deep concern in language that takes on a biblical ring: "The last two lines of the poem .... made me feel sorrowful for the child". The boy has become real. There is a touching directness in her compassion, "I wanted to reach out, pull him close and give him the one warm kiss he so much wanted..." It is not surprising that she ends by visualising him,

constructing a little beyond the text, "in his blue shorts and braces". To us this seems quite in keeping with the poem and certainly takes nothing away from it. What is more important, that image helps her to find further meaning as he stands "watching everyone show attention to the fire and not him".

There is a further significant achievement in her last paragraph. For the most part she has constructed a concrete and vivid scene, but momentarily she begins to recognise that the "red and gold and zany yellow" could be more than descriptive; it "also gave the feeling inside you".

For a sixteen year old who still unconsciously writes in dialect at times, this is an impressive achievement, especially when one realises that it is the third and final answer on her paper. The pressure of time could account for her misreading of the last prompt, but it might equally be true that what she is immediately concerned to articulate is her own empathy: "only the little boy stuck in my mind after reading it".

* * *

A further staging point

In our view Janice showed how a 16 year-old with reasonable competence as a writer could use these guidelines to advantage, despite the exam constraints. This is an important piece of evidence. At the same time, it is essential to ask, what happens to students who are confident enough to want to use their own strategies - setting the guidelines aside to some degree? In the set of scripts we were sent there was one girl who attempted this. As it happens, her "answer" breaks into two parts (from internal evidence); we will start by looking at the first.

The fire was huge to compare with what his heart needed. His need for love was 'brazen, fierce and huge'. That small boy with 'a face like pallid cheese' seems almost under other circumstance to be an angel. But the fire of hatred in his heart for not being wanted has burnt out his eyes. People say the eyes are connected to the heart his certainly seem to be. The colour suggests life and fierce reactions. I don't feel it is true of the boy. He is almost ash in his feelings. Almost dead and gone. I think it might mean what he could have been like alive and happy. This I feel because of the colours used red and yellow - happy colours. But he wasn't like that and just once, and once only I think because the poem suggests suprise, his eyes did burn, with hatred, with a desire so strong to be loved that even through his hurt eyes it could be seen. I think the reference to money suggests the price of his need. Three thousand guineas worth. A large price for such a small heart. That is [the] worth that could be put on the love he had to give but wasn't allowed to give to anyone. That he should feel such sadness is frightening. It says as frightening as fact and metaphor' the difference between truth and fiction both frightening but both different leaving no escape. It is frightening that such a small boy should feel such pain and there was no-one there to alleviate it.

The 'ordinary match intended for the lighting of a pipe or kitchen fire' suggests what the boy really is. Just an ordinary boy, just a kid who under normal circumstances might have led an ordinary life in the intended way. Then we are shown what can happen when one such individual is treated in the wrong way. 'Misused may set a whole menagerie of flame-fanged tigers roaring hungrily'. Humans are often compared to matches so useful so ordinary but if treated badly so lethal. The boy was treated badly by us and it released anger and frustration unequaled by the actual fire. It

brought out all the hatred ever stored up in that little heart.

And it is frightening that such a small child should carry such pain in his heart. That such a child could as the poem says 'set the sky on fire and choke the stars to heat'. It is frightening that we can allow such people to exist in such a state. The fear is emphasized by mentioning the boys actual size. The smallness of him to cause such a fire 'such skinny limbs and such a little heart'.

And then we are offered the remedy. So simple as remedies usually are. So pure a feeling and action 'one warm kiss'. We are not allowed to linger long on this, but to quickly realise what could have prevented this and then we are drawn quickly back to the reality and fear that there was no-one there to give this remedy. No-one there to care. 'Had there been anyone to offer this'.

Christine (1)

For Christine it makes no sense to talk separately about the small boy and the fire; she sees the two as one, and the poem as an extended metaphor. "His need for love was 'brazen, fierce and huge'..... the fire of hatred in his heart ... has burnt out his eyes". Her own writing itself explores at the level of symbolism. Thus "He is almost ash in his feelings" now, "Almost dead and gone". The hatred, like the fire, has burned and consumed him!

This reading informs the whole poem for her. "I think the reference to money suggests the price of his need". "The 'ordinary match' ... suggests what the boy really is ... just a kid who under normal circumstances might have lead an ordinary life". (Though, for a moment, "that small boy with 'a face like pallid cheese' seems almost under other circumstances to be an angel", too.)

There is a leaping, poetic imagination at work here. And we were delighted to see the examiner's comment: "Goodness me!"

For this student, it is not only "frightening that such a small child should carry such pain in his heart"; it is also "frightening that we can allow such people to exist in such a state". Yet the remedy is "so simple ... so pure a feeling and action". If "we are not allowed to linger long on this", it is because "we are drawn quickly back to the reality and fear". This is her judgement on the "presented world" of the poem - and tacitly she is agreeing with the poet.

We have no doubt, then, about the quality and imaginative intelligence of this response. In a sense, Christine seems from the beginning to have grasped the poem as a whole, and to be able to discuss it in an holistic manner. Yet, as she writes, she takes the images in series, almost line by line, making powerful new connections with each one, it seems, from her central perception.

Now, back to the exam room. At the point we have broken off, Christine has just started a new page (having tried and failed to squeeze her last sentence under the bottom line); with a few minutes still to spare before the exam ends, she seems to have done the dutiful thing, re-read the guidelines, and written three further paragraphs - one on each - before summing up:

> *The fire was huge but not as huge or frightening as the fire that burned within that little boy. Careful uses of both boy and match could have prevented both fires. But there was no one there to show the boy how to love and how to use the match and so both were burned both tortured beyond feeling. The boy needed love and understanding but his heart was dead because it had so much to give but no chance to give it. The love there that priceless sum was gradually turned*

to hate. Bit by bit day after day until it came to a peak. It needed to get out. So he lit a fire a huge fierce fire like the fire which burned in his heart but the fire was fed with wood whereas his fire was fed on hatred. On fear and rejection. To say he wanted attention is to trivialise his burden. He wanted love, he wanted people to care.

He was frightened that he held so much hate in his heart. He was suprised 'that one small boy ..... could make such a fire'. Suprised that he was able to set the 'sky on fire' and it almost seems as if he was suprised to find care. I might be reading this wrong but to 'choke the stars to heat' seems to me to suggest making people care. Making them cry and finally to understand.

I think frightening is too weak a word to use for such fear, terryfying is more suitable. It is the final feeling and the strongest feeling. Fear for him, for us for creating such a monster, for creating such world, fear that we live in such a world that a small boy can feel so rejected. Fear that he might suffer for what had to be done. Fear that there really isn't enough love in the world. Yes I thing ~~frightening~~ Fear is the strongest feeling that the poem evokes.

Christine (2)

Whether from fatigue, or from the attempt to wring more out of what's already been powerfully expressed, there is an interesting falling off at first: "Careful uses of both boy and match could have prevented" is abysmally prosaic compared with what has gone before. There are flashes where she makes connections with her earlier feelings. "So he lit a fire, a huge fierce fire, like the fire which burned in his heart". But even this peters out with "the fire was fed with wood". And over the stars choking there is probably plain confusion.

At this point then, in the exam conditions, the guidelines seem to impede, rather than to restore her failing energy. Still, in the final paragraph Christine does find something further to add - an impassioned plea, almost, to attend to the "terrifying" possibilities - "Fear for him, fear for us for creating such a monster, for creating such [a] world, fear that we live in such a world..."

It is important to recognise, then, that for some students the guidelines have to be set aside - and can even get in the way, if they are returned to. Equally, this script illustrated perfectly how necessary it is (especially when students are under pressure) to read positively and to set to one side, for the moment, the lurches they may be betrayed into. This is the girl, ironically, who completely misunderstands the reference to "fact and metaphor" - "the difference between truth and fiction", as she puts it! Yet what fuller response to metaphor could we ask for, at sixteen?

* * *

PART II

Experimenting with guidelines

Our careful scrutiny of the Cambridge material raised new questions for us. We were impressed by the way students at varying developmental staging points responded to the rubric and guidelines - even in exam conditions. No approach could be expected to produce positive achievements from every student on the one occasion, we realised; nevertheless, we began to ask ourselves whether this one, with suitable revisions, might be a valuable part of a teaching strategy helping to maximise the number of students who could write with involvement and conviction.

We started by listing the issues we had raised in our first seminar on "The Incendiary".

a) There were other ways of opening the rubric, leaving the way free for students either to ignore all the guidelines or to select from them at will. We thought of the following:

- These guidelines are intended to help you . . .
- You may ignore them if you wish . . .
- If you would like some possible ways of looking back over the poem, or thinking about it . . .
- If you feel there is something you want to say, go ahead; if not, you may find some of the following . . .

b) For students reading in silence, there are

difficulties in a poem like this (especially with the language). Would students respond better if the poem were read aloud? If so, how could this be accommodated in an examination room? If not, what are the consequences for many students?

c) In particular, this poem begins with a specially difficult noun clause, carried over seven lines before we reach the delayed verb "is frightening". Failure to unravel this could be critical. The elliptical opening that follows ("And frightening too") might also puzzle the silent reader. Such syntactical complexity is not untypical of poetry. Bearing in mind the full range of reading abilities at 16+, how does one help? Should the guidelines include a simplified construction, on the lines of:
"It is frightening", says the poet, "that one small boy . . . could make (such) a blaze"?

d) Can we encourage students to capitalise on the dynamics of reading and re-reading, perhaps by suggesting that they make notes of first impressions as these strike them, and then, on further reading, try to show how these develop, perhaps? If so, would invitations such as these help:
"What are your first reactions? - think of any details that spark these off . . . Try for a good re-reading. Are there any words or phrases that now help you to understand more ...."?

These could be a norm in coursework: how could they be adapted and fitted into an exam?

e) How could guidelines encourage students to build up a scene or person in their imagination, or to narrate themselves into the action?

f) There are multiple levels of meaning and significance for individual readers to construct within the parameters of any poem. How best can

guidelines help students to discover and speculate on a poem's potential meanings - while acknowledging the problematic nature of response?

g) In particular, this poem (like many others) is working "as fact and metaphor". How might guidelines alert students to potentials of this kind?

h) Many questions merely tell the student to affirm the views or ideas of the poem - or to praise the poet's craft. We need to find ways of encouraging students to use their own judgements in evaluating such things - and even criticizing them.

i) In particular, guidelines may need to prompt students to consider how the poet views an encounter, or an incident - especially when this is hinted at delicately or ironically.

Having taken stock in this way, we decided to produce a number of sharply different rubrics and guidelines for "The Incendiary" and to try these on Fourth and Fifth years, inviting the students to make their own evaluation of them.

The Wording of the guidelines

In the event we only allowed half-an-hour for each of us individually to 'knock off' a set of alternative guidelines. Even though the exercise was stimulating, we would not recommend this model! We suggest instead that a department, for example, works in pairs or threesomes; takes more time; and finally allows each group to discuss, reflect on and revise their first drafts, in a wider circle.
Despite its imperfections, though, our first experiment taught us a good deal, especially as we reviewed the students' comments on our efforts. What we are going to do is to start with the two most popular sets of guidelines or prompts, look at the wording in some detail, and report what the students had to say.

GUIDELINES SET 'A'

Intended effects

Read the following poem a number of times until you feel you have begun to get inside it.
Try to imagine the scene from the viewpoint of both the boy, and the poet, as observer and recorder.

Try to imagine the scene, construct the scene for yourself. Try to take up two positions, the participant's and the observer's.

Below are a number of questions you may ask yourself to help you express freely your own reactions to the poem.

See if the prompts help you (they may or they may not).

POEM FOLLOWS

GUIDELINES CONTINUE

The fire figures largely in the poem but is it the only or even the main concern of the poet?

The observer's deeper concern, not just a fire?

What might have motivated the actions of the boy?

The boy's motives,
(Q. Are prompts needed?)
(Where to look?)

What are your feelings towards what he has done?

Your personal evaluation,
(Q. A bit soon?)

The poet says that he found it frightening that the boy should start the fire.
Of what might the poet have been frightened?

Deeper sources of fright?

Do you feel from your reading that it was in fact frightening?

Your personal reactions beyond fright.
(Q. A danger of surface description?)

Are there other ways you might describe his actions?

Our comments

There is an obvious attempt to simplify language - though the hurried drafting still shows through.

Constructing the scene is an important starter, we feel. (Q. Because it is in the rubric, will it not be overlooked?)

We are uncertain if the order of the last 5 prompts is right: "What are your feelings ..." seem to belong towards the end, perhaps?

Q. Is a prompt still needed for the "metaphor"? - and may be for a few ideas expressed in compressed form (like "burnt out little eyes")?

Q. Where the language is very compressed, will an invitation to tease that out be needed?

* * *

GUIDELINES SET 'B'	Intended effects
Read the following poem a number of times until you feel you have begun to get inside it; then look at the questions printed below it, which are intended to help you to express freely your own reactions to the poem.	(The original wording of the Cambridge Board has been accepted).

POEM FOLLOWS

GUIDELINES CONTINUE	
How well do you feel you understand this small boy?	Focus on the boy.
What did he do? *Why did he do it?* *What images do you have of the fire?* *Why do they stand out in your mind's eye?* *How effectively does the poet convey them?*	Try to understand him, to empathise, perhaps. Construct the scene (subjectively). Work your way through condensed images then stand back to think of them as effects on you, produced by the poet. (Q. Too objective?)
How effective was the poet in putting across his reactions?	Again, stand back and consider effects on you (and craft). (Q. An interruption?)
What deeper questions does the poem raise in your mind?	Reflect on the incident, its deeper meanings.
Look at the prompts above, which are intended to help you to express freely your own reactions to the poem. *You may ignore these if you wish.*	Feel free to use or ignore.

Our comments

The second rubric (at end) may be a reassuring bit of redundancy.

The initial focus on the boy may feel natural and helpful to the students.

Shifts from subjective feelings to objective consideration of "effectiveness" (and back) may pose problems - unless students choose prompts, selectively.

Language is a little simpler and more concise.

Q. Is a prompt still needed for the "metaphor"?

* * *

The students' criteria

The majority of students chose these two sets of guidelines in preference to the rest. But we asked for more than that : we wanted to know why they chose one and not others. To our delight many students took the invitation seriously, offering up to an A4 side of thoughtful comment. As a result, we could see much more clearly how they viewed this element in the exam, and what they felt would be helpful. At the same time, some - though not all - revealed how perceptive they could be about the problems of articulating responses to literature.

Here is a selection, then, from those who chose Set A:

- The questions are straightforward, but you can incorporate your own view as they cover aspects of the poem quite generally instead of asking specifics.
  Well set out, easily understood - I liked exploring the poet's feelings.

- The way the author of the questions had put them encouraged me to actually look further into the poem.
  I could relate to them.

- I chose this set because it allowed me to express my feelings freely; the other set seemed too obvious and straightforward.
- This set appealed to me because I felt they gave me the chance of expressing my opinions by writing around them. Unlike the others, these were not controlled; I could express my feelings, without any hindrance. / I chose this set as they seemed more suitable for my answers.

The following selection come from those who favoured Set B:

- These questions reassured me : I knew they would lead me where I wanted to go.

- This set were ideal for me to answer : I liked their directness, knew exactly what they were referring to and felt I could express myself fully. They made me feel "close" to the poem, for although simply phrased they involved "deep" answers.

- This set allowed me to delve into as many aspects of the poem as I wanted to. They were about the poem and its style, and led to its hidden meanings and the way the boy felt.
  I chose this set because I thought they would help me express most openly my feelings on the main aspects of the poem - for instance, the fire and the reasons for the boy's act. The questions really made you think about the deeper meanings of the poem; they encouraged you to search for answers .... A pupil of my age usually has to be prompted into thinking exactly what the poet is putting across. Good questions can also arouse the reader's interest if at first the poem fails to do so.
  I liked - actually liked - the questions. They ranged over all aspects of the poem, so that you could 'say your piece' fully, and they positively helped you to have a better understanding of the poem.

- This set allowed me to express my feelings about the poem in the most natural way. They existed to assist me, not to make me perform tricks, so I found them much more appealing than the others.
  I love poetry. Often I want to "feel" a poem, not to be antagonised by having

to "comprehend" it, like an exercise. These questions led me in exactly the right direction at my pace; I knew precisely what was required. I hate drawn-out questions which do not allow me to relate to the poem, to tease out its relevancies.

- I felt that the questioner was interested in me and my reactions to the poem. He showed me the way without holding my hand all the time.
This set provide better guidelines for me to express my reactions to and thoughts on the poem as a whole. They are fairly simple questions, but can be answered in thoughtful detail, so their very simplicity acts as an aid in making my views clearer. The instructions also give more freedom in allowing me to disregard the questions which hold no significance or interest for me. Opinions were more encouraged by this set, which I suppose were like a handrail at the side of steps : you don't have to use it, but its support is there if you need it : it prevents you stumbling and allows you to pause and catch your breath now and again. (I realise my simile doesn't quite work!?)

- I chose this set because I found they best enabled me to express my thoughts and feelings about the poem. I like poetry, but need help often as I'm not good at it. These questions helped me to understand each point of the poem, and so I could give a "complete" account of what it meant to me. The directness of each question prevented confusion and got straight to the point instead of "waffling" and discussing less important qualities... The comment at the foot of the sheet, "you may ignore

these if you wish", allowed me to add certain views I may have had.

* * *

We are very indebted to these students. From their intelligent comments we can extract a succinct check-list to guide teachers and examiners in constructing guidelines.

* Don't produce another comprehension exercise
* Offer a handrail (in case help is needed)
* Be simple and direct (preventing confusion)
* Arouse interest in the poem
* Show interest in "me" and "my reactions"
* Encourage me to look further into the poem
* Prompt me to think ... delve ... tease out relevancies and hidden meanings
* Allow me to ignore prompts and to add my own views

All these are positive points. However, we learned two other things that are not explicitly present in this list - and arose from our own omissions; we regard them as two further items.

* Invite me to consider compressed expressions.
* (In this case) give me a hint about the underlying metaphor.

* * *

Coping with the switch to guidelines

When students beginning the "exam course" in their Fourth Year are presented with traditional exam questions on poems, they quickly build up a mental set about what is expected of them. Too often reading a poem becomes a "test" and the questions on it demonstrate what the examiner wants from them.

It should have been no surprise to us, therefore, that in this experiment, with classes gearing up to a traditional external exam, some students not only headed their work "Test" but managed to ignore the freedom offered, numbering their "answers" in the familiar mode of a comprehension exercise, and totally subordinating themselves to what they took to be our "demands". Their results were uniformly prosaic and unsatisfying. But they taught us a lesson. A new strategy on the page can't unlock the door for everybody. More often procedures are things students have to learn to use.

However, despite the feeling that this was a one-off opportunity to break the mould that would still be enforced later in the year, in GCE/CSE, the welcome fact was that most of the students enjoyed it, and began to use their freedom in various ways. The two schools concerned left us in no doubt about this - and readers can judge for themselves from the comments we have quoted.

What more can we report? Let's be frank that, in the event, we don't think that our guidelines were actually better than the Cambridge Plain Text examiners'. And in one respect, most sets fell short, because they did not prompt a successful probing of that phrase, "as fact and metaphor". Nevertheless there were a wide variety of positive achievements, including a pleasing number from students in a Fourth Year mixed ability "exam" group. We have decided therefore to focus next

on a representative pair of these students, neither of whom would have been counted as among the more able writers, at that time. How are they affected by the guidelines? Do they feel at ease with the framework they are offered - prompted to think, encouraged to look further? Or do they feel under pressure, not free to articulate a personal response?

Martin was asked to use Set A. Here is his writing.

INCENDIARY

The fire is not the only concern of the poet. The frightening face and the frightening act seem to be the main concern. The actual fact that the author finds the boy frightening seems to be the main point that he is trying to get across.

I think the boy was motivated by his lonelyness. The author gets this across to the reader in the last two lines.

The boy must have been very lonely & unloved indeed to be driven to such distruction.

I think the poet found the boys actions frightening because it was just the boys lonelyness that made him start the fire and there must be more boys feeling lonely that could start fires just as easily. So the poet feels that the same thing could happen again.

I don't feel that the boys act was frightening but more pitiful.

Martin.

Although this holds rather firm to the handrail, the laconic style masks some perceptive moments, which get to the heart of the meanings and testify to an empathic response. Think of the following:

the frightening face ...

very lonely and unloved indeed ...

to be driven to such destruction ...

I don't feel ... was frightening, but more pitiful.

The "pallid cheek" and "burnt-out little eyes" have been attended to : for Martin this face is frightening. The boy is "driven" into action, he feels, impelled by a lack of love and the loneliness that follows from it.

So Martin is interpreting the action as a whole. Equally, despite the "destruction", he feels understanding and pity - challenging the poet's initial reaction.

These are simple but positive achievements, encouraging from someone in the first term of the Fourth Year.

Let us turn now to Michael, who was asked to use Set B.

I feel I understand him fairly well and how he feels at the presant time. How frightened he is. He lit a fire on a farm destroying property and crops.

He did it to keep warm at night because he is out all on his own with no where to go. The poem gives the image of a huge fire spreading across fields and property with huge leaping flames lashing up at the sky and thick dense black smoke.

They stand out in my mind because the description in the poem forms a picture of the fire.

I think the poet has conveyed them very well because you can imagine the fire.

The poet gives me the feelings that the boy is neglected and has,nt eaten for days it is a feeling of sorrow for the boy. The poet was very effective in putting across his reactions, it makes

you think that you are there watching what is going on.

The poem raises the questions of what is the boy doing there with no one to look after him? Where are his parents but if he has no parents why is he not in a home? Do people know he even exists?

Michael.

Again, the hand is kept fairly firmly on the rail, but there is strong evidence of imaginative construction of the boy's background and life - consonant with the text, we would say - and a vivid sense that "you are there watching what is going on".

We would group the main positive features as follows:

- *How frightened he is ...*

  to keep warm at night ...

  out all on his own with nowhere to go ...

  neglected ... hasn't eaten for days ...

  with no one to look after him ...

- *a huge fire spreading across fields ...*

  leaping flames lashing up at the sky ...

  thick dense black smoke ...

- *a feeling of sorrow for the boy ...*

  Do people know he even exists?

This is a youngster who still thinks in concrete terms. He projects not psychological but physical isolation for the boy - who's possibly abandoned and living

rough, he feels. Thus the boy is frightened too. And the eloquent images of the fire help to suggest why. So the final series of questions "raised in his mind" are very expressive : they suggest that in conclusion Michael is close to outrage. At the same time he feels sorrow - and that ambiguity is in sympathy with the poet's we would say.

Again, this is a valuable, developmental staging point in learning to articulate responses in written form.

To sum up then. Both these sets of guidelines offered support to students whose written responses to literature were still at an early developmental staging point. We believe this is a crucial criterion. It is writers such as these who need understanding help as they search for structure for what they might have to say. Yet in offering them a kind of structure, the set of guidelines have to feel natural, and appropriate to their own exploration of the poem. "Guidelines" can all too easily turn into a straight-jacket. To avoid this the language has to be that of person to person, encouraging in return the student's personal voice. This may sound a severe test but, in a sense, both sets of guidelines have passed it, so far as these two students are concerned.

Processes that need time

However good the guidelines, students still need time. By a happy accident one student, Matthew, interpreted our invitation as a chance to explain "The way that I would explore the poem".

After beginning by looking for "any metaphors or similies" (no prizes for the source of that idea!), he tells us "I would then read through the poem again and make sure I understand the meaning of the poem and the feelings expressed". That is his way, we believe, of saying that he wants to grasp the plain sense of the words, and feel able to follow the outline of the experience. However, this in itself is not enough :

"I would then turn to the poem and read it a couple more times and try to learn the poem itself ... making sure I knew the words and feelings". He seems to feel the need - and don't we all - for a kind of familiarity with the pattern of words and feelings, building up more expectations as he "learns" it.

What comes next? "After this has been completed I would then read it again to bring the poem to life in my mind". So even after two or three careful readings he still does not feel, we take it, that he has the poem alive in his imagination! What might this entail? "I could bring the important sentences, words, metaphors and similies to make the picture move along in my mind". In doing so, he realises that he must bring together "all the bits and pieces describing the boy". "For example" he notes, "'That one small boy with a face like pallid cheese' would give me a picture of an ordinary small child with a pale face. Then there is the description of his eyes ..... Then there are the features of his body to be added 'such skinny limbs...'..."

"When all this has been completed", he tells us, "we move in to the description of what the boy is doing in the poem. So I would read through it again picking out the parts which would bring together the picture". And this he does!

This is by no means the end of his explanation. But he has said enough already, we take it, to show us the kind of thoughtful reading practices he has in mind. Reading of this quality demands time, as he has shown perfectly clearly. If they wish to encourage good reading practices, teachers and examiners will simply have to provide this time.

Finally, a qualitative shift in reading - so that the poem is imaginatively alive - should empower a qualitative shift in the writing. This also requires time!

Coda : The Experience you bring to bear

As it happens, the responses of one girl (who we leave anonymous) reinforced a particularly important lesson about bringing a text to life. To realise the force of key images in a poem - in this case "the burnt-out little eyes" and the ferocity of the flames, let us say - we have to bring something from our experience to bear. Otherwise we may find such violence and despair difficult to imagine. Some students in the experiment actually found this well-nigh incomprehensible, in fact: they were unable to empathise. As teachers, then, we have to think twice about "failures of imagination", whether they concern pallid-faced boys or ninety year-old women living in isolation. And equally we have to read with particular understanding when a student betrays the fact that in bringing "the poem to life in my mind", she is close to reliving a painful personal experience. Sometimes when this happens the personal experience obscures and overwhelms that of the poem. This is an unavoidable human reaction. On the other hand, in the following piece of writing, our seminar group could only admire the courage and self-control with which this student saw something of her own experience represented in the boy's.

I understand the poem by exploring my own reactions to the boy and the scene. I see a small fragile boy frightened at the fact that he alone could start a roaring fire. I think the boy needs to be loved but he has been forgotten. He is letting his confusion and anger out by starting a fire which he did not really expect or want. The boy has so much love to give but no one to share it with so his love has turned into confused bitterness. He may have started the fire so that someone realises that he is there and he does exist.

I compare the scene to the wild burning in the boy's heart. The boy is also experiencing the thick

choking smoke which is rising into the night air. The angry, violent flames which are spreading across the field of crops are also ripping apart the boy's heart. The fire is destorying crops which took months to grow in a couple of minutes. This could have happened with a relationship the boy had with the person who suddenly forgot him and pushed him aside.

I bring the scene to life by comparing the boy to my own experiences. I felt the same as the boy did recently when my parents split up. I felt forgotten and pushed aside. I often wanted to realise the burning pain from my heart and burn down a building or something just as important. I think the poet is resting on the boy's emotions. "With a face like pallid cheese", to me sounds like a face without expression. "Burnt-out little eyes", to me sounds like eyes without willing or hope. I think the poet is using the description of the fire to express the boy's innocent anger and emotions.

* * *

PART III

Ideological issues : a further experiment

At this point we turned in our seminars to the way a number of exam boards treated the "unseen poem" and the questions on it. When we compared their approaches with the Cambridge Plain Test groups, we were deeply dissatisfied. The "questions" were particularly stultifying - many of them could well have killed off any natural enjoyment of poetry.

One of the poems, however, did catch our attention; it was Lawrence's "Money Madness", set by the SREB. There was a certain gesturing and slackness of thought in the poem itself, we all felt, but we did recognise a genuine attempt by the examiners to break away from the unconscious ideological assumption that most of the poetry suitable for schools should concern itself with "cherishing private souls" (3) - not with social and political issues. This sharpened a new question in our minds : when a poet moves into the political arena, how do you then help students to explore - and allow them the chance to differ?

In this case the SREB questions were entirely conventional. They opened with a stock "comprehension" ploy : "Explain the effectiveness and meaning of any two (words and phrases), as used within the poem". The next question asked the student to reproduce the line of argument (possibly with some attention to language): "Show how the poem builds the theme of madness". A further "comprehension" question followed: "Explain what, in the poet's opinion, is the ultimate madness". Finally, the questioners return to the line of argument, asking the student to:

> "show the stages by which the poem develops the dangers caused by money and how it attempts to convince the reader".

The effect of such questions, we believe, is to objectify "the poem" - and in doing so, to trivialise it. Nothing suggests that this is a passionately felt poem. The nearest we get to that is "show ... how it attempts to convince the (presumably general, impersonal) reader". How we respond to that passion, what we make of it, is actually set aside. The conventional questions, with their unconscious ideology, have checkmated any generous impulses which prompted the choice of that poem in the first place!

There was a challenge here that we felt we had to take on. So we collected a number of poems that faced the contemporary world with political passion or irony. Despite some uncertainty at first, we agreed that Adrian Mitchell's "Open Day at Porton Down" looked the most appropriate for our purposes. Forwarned by our previous experience, we set 2 - 3 hours aside and worked in a group. Quite quickly we recognised some key difficulties the poem could present readers working on their own; the multiplicity of "voices"; the unsignalled shifts from one to another; the compression and irony ... and the sheer horror of some of the images. For all but the most alert and mature readers, guidelines were going to be vital, we felt. How could we help the student to use them flexibly? Even after two hours we were warned by an experienced examiner in our group that our well-intentioned prompts still had the ring of conventional "questions"! So we tried the idea of suggesting two phases : a first phase for "trying" to understand the meaning" and, gradually, "to learn the poem itself", to use Matthew's words, and a second to brood over the experience again and "its impact on you", bringing to bear your own political understanding. As the meeting ended we hastily agreed to avoid the "unseen poem" format and to set up a range of contexts for reading the poem and using the guidelines.

Here, then, is the poem with the suggested guidelines.

OPEN DAY AT PORTON

"The poet is imagining himself on a visit to a place where chemical weapons are being made - Porton Down".

These bottles are being filled with madness,
A kind of liquid madness concentrate
Which can be drooled across the land
Leaving behind a shuddering human highway ...

A welder trying to eat his arm.

Children pushing stale food into their eyes
To try to stop the chemical spectaculars
Pulsating inside their hardening skulls.

A health visitor throwing herself downstairs,
Climbing the stairs, throwing herself down again
Shouting: Take the nails out of my head.

There is no damage to property.

Now, nobody likes manufacturing madness,
But if we didn't make madness in bottles
We wouldn't know how to deal with bottled madness.

We don't know how to deal with bottled madness.

We all really hate manufacturing madness
But if we didn't make madness in bottles
We wouldn't know how to be sane.

Responsible madness experts assure us
Britain would never be the first
To uncork such a global brainquake.

But suppose some foreign nut sprayed Kent
With his insanity aerosol ...
Well, there's only one answer to madness.

Adrian Mitchell.

"In order to help you work your way carefully through this poem, spend some time thinking about the following, making notes if you wish:

- *your impressions in the first four lines as you think about the bottles;*

- *what this leads the poet to imagine in lines 5 - 11;*

- *your reactions to the line "There is no damage to property" (whether you feel reassured by the fact that "There is no damage");*

- *the arguments there seem to be for bottling madness (there seems to be a dilemma here);*

- *how you respond to these arguments (how you feel about the way the dilemma is thought through);*

- *what the last line seems to be getting at.*

Then looking back over the poem (and any notes you have made) what do you now want to say about

- *what the poet makes of the experience;*

- *its impact on you;*

- *your response to his viewpoint?"*

A constrained experiment

The first examples we are going to consider come from a group of 16-17 year-olds, none of whom had got an O level "pass" in Literature the previous summer. Because of the pressures on their one-year "re-sit" course the teachers concerned (colleagues of one of our members) felt obliged to use the timed exam

context, restricting the students to 35 minutes or so.

Although this procedure ran against our intentions, it threw up two important lessons as we reviewed the results together. First, it demonstrated that quite a wide range of these students had been able to use the guidelines offered to some advantage, coming to terms with a complex political poem. Second, the time pressures demonstrably forced the students to plump for one or other of the two phases. There simply was not the opportunity to explore both at leisure, or to move back and forward.

What we intend to do then is to move from a student who seems to us around a relatively early staging point to others who offer increasingly complex responses. What are the signs of positive achievement?

Let us start with Vikki:

My impressions of the first four lines in this poem, about a visit to a place where chemical weapons are being made, are of the sadness that mankind is manufacturing. These bottles hold the key to sudden madness with devastation to human minds. These bottles are being filled with chemicals which harm life on earth but leave the buildings untouched.

The poet imagines the effects of these weapons driving people to lose control over their bodies, commiting suicide to get rid of the buzzing madness which plagues their minds.

The line "There is no damage to property" shows the selfishness of the "mad men" who organised the weapons to be made. What does it matter if there is no property because there will not be anyone to need and use these properties after the chemicals have been used. The fact "There is no damage" is a very ignorant way to look at their effects.

The arguments there seem to be for bottling madness are showing the confusion of the people who are dealing with the chemicals. They seem to contradict themselves.

Vikki.

Vikki is clearly following the prompts in phase one quite closely; her paragraph structure reveals this. She does not reach the second phase - and, as we have argued, this is not surprising within the time allowed. Nevertheless, the guidelines have not by any means blocked her genuine responses. Among positive signs we note:

- *these bottles hold the key to sudden madness*
- *devastation to human minds*
- *driving people to lose control over their bodies*
- *the buzzing madness that plagues their minds*
- *the selfishness of the 'madmen' who organised the weapons to be made*
- *there will not be anyone to need and use these properties*
- *a very ignorant way to look at their effects*
- *the arguments ... showing the confusion ... seem to contradict themselves.*

On reflection we realise how much Vikki has made every word count - in her limited quota. She is sharply attentive to the poem and the central effects of what

she is making of the text. However simple it looks, the demands her writing is meeting are considerable.

The next writer is still using the prompts from phase one, but with much more freedom. He has time for three paragraphs:

I get an impression of awesome power, a substance that is only seperated from me by a few millimetres of glass. It is frightening to think that such a harmless looking substance could cause the annihialation of a whole race in the most horrifying painful way possible, and so slowly, - that the suffering is so great that you can not wait for the pleasant relief that death will bring.

Who cares about the fact that there is no damage to the property, I would be perfectly happy to be without a roof over my head and sleep at night out in the cold than have to suffer such a horrific death. It is an ironic statement, if [you are] going to destroy the people, you may as well destroy their homes because there is not going to be anybody to live in them.

They feel it is a necessity to have such substance for the use in chemicals, so that although they would not be the first to use it, they would use it to retaliate proving themselves to be just as bad as their attackers.

Michael.

We see the main shift here in the eloquence with which a personal response is expressed:

- *I get an impression of awesome power ...*
- *Who cares about the fact that there is no damage ...*
- *proving themselves to be just as bad as their attackers.*

Whether near to the guidelines or no, this writer is saying what he feels. He is in charge of the structure, as these three key quotations show. As he writes, we know how he feels aghast, outraged, and bitingly condemnatory. He fully realises that language can combine the expression of feelings and attitudes with that of thoughts. And his imagination is alive. He really sees those "few millimetres of glass" separating "me" from this harmless looking (annihilating) substance. "I would be perfectly happy to be without a roof over my head", he writes, projecting himself into the experience he is constructing. He sees the poet's irony and sardonically interjects his own: "You cannot wait for the pleasant relief that death will bring". He supplies the missing "logical" step hidden in the last line: "they would use it to retaliate". His moral judgement is clear.

And there it ends. Surely a writer like this has earned the right to reflect - and to have time to do so?

Supposing he had written more, as our next writer does: What might that effort have cost him? In Lucinda's case there are recurrent moments when she grapples for a word or a construction and seemingly has not time to shape it before rushing on. Bear this in mind as you look to see what she is struggling to achieve:

I thought the bottles represented the madness of a nation, and ~~including~~ leaving some desaster because of it, "leaving behind a shuddering human highway". Then the poet imagines what the effect of this 'bottled madness' has on people. Where quite unbearable pain and suffering is brought to these ordinary humans, the ordinary emphasised by the fact that he tells us that one is a health visitor and one is a small child.

My reactions to 'There is no damage to property' is ~~that~~ it makes me feel quite the opposite, where the

evidence is before your eyes anyway. It is the same sort of blind statement as in the event of a nucler war and the television announces that: 'there is no need to be alarmed'. The poem puts across the argument that might occur. It starts off with a statement, 'Now, nobody likes manufacturing madness', and that seems like common sense, but then the discussion goes on in a sort of twisted logic. They seemed to have gr created something so that they know how to deal with it.

It is thought through by the reassurance that now we have the madness bottled we can know how to be sane. And then there is a complete contradiction. That Britain would never be the first to open this 'global brainquake' admitting that it is an insane circle thought out well by insane men.

The last line is stating how our world is now really [mad]. How such an insane substance can be sanely, and logically, actually considered by such important and intelligent men.

The poet is cynical about the people who have made it but the is nothing you can do against their very well thought 'logic'. It reminds me of today and [the] threat of nuclar war, the way the super power talks so civalised to each other about the destruction of human life as we know it. The way men can talk themselves into anything if he has enough words.

Lucinda.

From the opening sentence - the discovery of the metaphor - there are so many thoughts to be developed. Represented in the poem, this student finds (part of) a world she feels she recognises. To explore that fully might require two or three hours of concentrated, reflective meditation. That is denied her, and in the circumstances, with so many complex things to say, she uses the guidelines to give herself a minimal structure

which she can recurrently bend to new purposes.

For example:

- *I thought the bottles represented the madness of the nation*

- *It is the same sort of blind statement as in the event of a nuclear war*

- *seems like common sense, but then ... goes on in a sort of twisted logic*

- *admitting that it is an insane circle thought out well*

- *how such an insane subject can be so sanely and logically ... considered by such important and intelligent men*

- *it reminds me of the way the super power talks so civilised - about the destruction of human life as we know it.*

Extracted like this, these reflections are not merely signs of a mind tracing local and detailed effects - though those are indeed attended to. What Lucinda is also doing is to "read" the poem and judge its experience as a metaphor or model for the world as she knows it.

We have room for one more example, chosen because it shows a student who seems to understand pretty well "what the poet makes of the experience" but in the end rejects it - taking a more profoundly pessimistic stance. We pick it up after the first two paragraphs:

'We all really hate manufacturing madness. But if we didn't make madness in bottles, we would not know how to be sane'.

I feel this stanza is showing how the actual

designers, manufacturers and users all trying to shift the blame, to find an excuse for their feelings that weapons are a necessity.

The poet does not feel that this justifys the fact of the amount of damage that can be caused, the response is to claim that experts say 'Britain will never be the first to uncork this Global brainquake'. More excuses and more questions, these are just followed by even more excuses.

I feel that the poem puts across what the poet feels very well, how he sees what is to be, and how every person involved does not like to be connected with the chemical arms, and when faced with the question, Why? they fumble the words and totally contradict themselves. They give reasons not to worry, these backed up with words people a few grades further up their higherachy have said.

I agree with this poem, I feel that what he says is true, that there is no good solid reason for the chemical weapons, but also that there is no point in worrying about the fact as there is no way the everyday person can control it, can any one control it? that is the question, another never answered.

'Well theres only one answer to madness'.

Joanne.

This is a much more concrete social world, in some ways, than the last student's. There are "actual designers, manufacturers and users all trying to shift the blame". "They fumble the words and totally contradict themselves ... backed up with words people a few grades further up their hierarchy have said". This student wants to place where, within a society, responsibilities actually lie. All the more ironic, then, that although "I feel what he says is true ... there is no way the everyday person can control it, can anyone control it?" So she construes

the final question in a more darkly fatalistic way. You don't have to agree completely with the poem in order to learn from it.

An alternative approach

We have seen that a range of older students, even under the unnecessary time constraints typical of exams, could use the guidelines to structure the kind of literary critical approach that is normally expected. One member of our seminar group, however, working with Fourth and Fifth Years, wanted to try something different. Though he made the guidelines available, as an aid to reading and reflection, when it came to writing he felt "that the 'point of view' of the pupils and their emotional response could best be drawn out by creating an imaginary role in which to explore" ... So he drew up a new rubric:

> *"Using the following poem imagine that you, in company with the poet, have visited Porton. Porton Down is a place where chemical weapons are researched and manufactured. On your return the poet recorded all those things you heard said in this poem. You have been asked to write an account for the school magazine of your thoughts and feelings arising from the visit".*

What does an approach like this offer? It invites the reader to transform a real encounter with the poem into a new imaginary construct. So the "account", in this instance, will offer evidence - sometimes obliquely, sometimes more directly - of the depth of the student's personal engagement with the poem.

To illustrate the range of opportunities let us look at two quite different interpretations of the rubric. First, a narrative that incorporates quite complex reflective comment:

As our bus pulled up outside the security gate of the outer fence, we could see a large, white, futuristic building. It was surrounded by a number of fences and walls, all barbed wire and brick. It reminded me of the High Security prison blocks that one sees on Television. We were on the only access road into the grounds.

As we left the ~~grounds~~ bus, we were issued with security passes for 'recognition purposes', and warned to keep them in view at all times. Someone whispered that it was because of recent sabotage threats from various 'anti' groups. We were herded onto a fleet of little electric cars for the remaining ~~5~~ five minutes of our journey.

~~It's~~ It is difficult to describe the next hour and a half which I spent in that place. How does one describe a man making weapons intended for destruction in the crudist manner possible, through lingering agonising death? Not quiet and ~~easy~~ comparatively painless when we [think of] the weapons of forty years ago. Is this really progress, or just a step backwards into the times of savages when men were ~~himself~~ a little more than animals? A sad comparison to make, because animals do not kill their own race just for the hell of it.

Our guide, a nice, homely woman in about her mid-forties, read out a pre-prepared statement of what her employers actually did. The weapons were for defence purposes only, deterents for retaliatory devices (the latter a contradiction in itself). Our country, we were assured, would never initiate an attack. Oh, and of course, there would be no damage to property. How reassuring, but what use is property if the people are dead, dying or permanently maimed? What use for a country without people?

There was a lot said for and against the devices we saw, on the outside corridors of the mad-house.

They stopped oposing factions attacking us, they ~~took us~~ kept us alert, so as to protect the future. They would kill, or drive people mad, to the brink of death but not beyond. I think it is time for a serious rethink of modern ethics, when all scientists can do is try to invent more and more ways of murdering their fellow men.

As we drove away, I could not help thinking of what we had not seen had not been allowed to see . . . .

Philippa.

What is Philippa trying to do? From the start we notice a "white, futuristic building" set (almost symbolically?) against a security gate, fences, walls and barbed wire. There is a feeling of menace, as someone "whispers" and they are "herded" on to a fleet of electric cars. The place has become real to her. Her imagination is moving on beyond the poem, then, but very much in sympathy with it.

It is not surprising that once inside, she feels "It is difficult to describe ... How does one describe..?" This place signifies "destruction in the crudest manner possible, through lingering, agonising death". Here is a terse summary of what she has learnt from the early sections of the poem. And it moves her to reflect: "Is this really progress....?"

A moment later, we are back to the actual visit - we meet the guide, "a nice homely woman" reading out her "pre-prepared statement of what her employers actually did". It's a brilliantly ironic projection of the kind of reassuring spokesperson that would be appropriate for the words: "Now, nobody likes manufacturing madness ... We all really hate manufacturing madness". And the afterthought - "Oh, and of course, there would be no damage ... How reassuring.." - is perfectly in harmony with the poet's irony.

Throwing together the arguments she has been fed (and imagined), then, she makes her main point: "it is time for a serious rethink of modern ethics". But she leaves us with a sense of being excluded from a menacingly secretive activity, the very access to which is laundered: "I could not help thinking of what we had not seen, had not been allowed to see ..."

Philippa has used the resources of the poem to make a powerful political statement of her own. It seems to us a very valuable way of reflecting on the poetry one has read.

Our second writer, James (a Fourth Year student), takes a different line. He is writing an article, as an investigative reporter:

> *Madness? You may feel you'd have to [be] crazy to go near it, let alone make it, But up in Porton Down they do just this as I found out on a recent visit. Porton Down is a place where chemical weapons are researched and manufactured and I have been trying to find out more about these weapons. These weapons are designed to make everyone go absolutely mad causing death upon death by driving people absolutely insane. It is hard to imagine such a terrible thing hapening, people trying to eat their own arms, people climbing upstairs and throwing themselves down again, maybe even doing both of these while shouting for some-one to remove the nails they they had stuck in their heads. Total and utter madness everywhere, almost un-escapable, causing death, but even those who survive arn't likely to get any compensation, Insurance will not cover structural damage because there shall not be any, while you suffer your slow, long and agonising death the buildings around ~~w+++~~ may survive for hundreds of years longer. Some people think that this fact should make you happy, reassured that chemicals arn't quite as bad as you may have thought they where, but let's face it, unless we happen to be inside a gas-proof life support system, which could turn carbon dioxide into*

oxygen, at the exact time the chemicals were released, then the fact of no structural damage is of no use to us at all. If the whole of Britain was affected by chemical weapons then many people would just be leaving their houses and property to the government, who will no doubt use the money gained on, among other things, creating more of these weapons to spread the terrors of madness, and lunacy even further across the face of the earth. Of course, unlike us the British government wouldn't be dead. The people who are on the British side of declaring the war would probably be in a shelter while all the inocent citizens, who neither have a say in the matter or a chance of survival, die insane.

The manufacturers say that 'if we didn't make madness in bottles we wouldn't know how to deal with bottled madness', but the truth of the matter is that we won't know how to deal with bottled madness. The only solution revealed that we know of is to fight back. If some-one does know how to cure this insanity problem caused by the weapons, then they're keeping very quiet about it. There is allways the chance, however, that the British, French, American, Russian, or any other government in the world, may know the answer of how to cure chemical madness, and in the case of chemical threat this cure may be revealed ~~by~~ to the people of it's country, but before then no-one would know so that no other country could find the answer, so only that governments country would survive the madness, while the other innocent people die, but even the hope of this is a long, long shot. Another thing that people are heard to of said is that if we didn't bottle madness we wouldn't know how to be sane. Surely, however, madness is the lack of knowing sane-ness, not sane the lack of knowing madness. Of course experts say that we would never be the first to use this kind of weapon, but I ask if it is not impossible to make a statement like that, as if someone is mad enough to accept the production of these weapons

past the necessary point, then are they not likely to be mad enough to use one first? Of course, what is the point of worrying about these things, we're never likely to see the day when we can have a say in what we're exposed to, but that's not how leaders see things, they see it as a country on the whole, and us citizens are just pieces to be bound to be killed in a game of two governments. The main madness of all this, however, that if some foreign leader was to use this insanity against us, there would only be one answer for madness, and that's to give madness back.

James.

The title announces his theme, and his rhetorical opening sentence is equally powerful: "Madness, you may feel you'd have to be crazy to go near it, let alone make it ..." What follows, after he has explained his role, is in part an extended paraphrase of the poem - and it is a "paraphrase" in which he becomes fully involved imaginatively. In part, also, he seizes certain lines and builds well beyond them, yet still in the spirit of the poem.

Let us start with a minor example: "Take the nails out of my head" provokes him to the sickening, concrete image of the "nails they had stuck in their heads". A more extended example follows from "There is no damage to property". This really catches him: he savagely depicts the buildings "surviving for hundreds of years longer", "while you suffer your slow, long and agonising death". Then he turns on those who know they will still be alive: "The people who are on the British side of declaring the war would probably be in a shelter while all the innocent citizens, who neither have a say in the matter or a chance of survival, die insane". The last two words hit us with their rhythmic power.

Then James returns to the poem, and the dealing with bottled madness. "The only solution revealed that we know of is to fight back". But he is sceptical.

Suppose someone does know? - "then they're keeping very quiet about it!" How can you trust people who deal with madness, he asks: "if someone is mad enough to accept the production of these weapons past the necessary point, then are they not likely to be mad enough to use one first?" In conclusion, he recognises "the main madness in all this" - "there would be only one answer to madness, and that's to give madness back".

These are two of the most striking examples from several we could have chosen - by both Fourth and Fifth Year students. It is a testimony to this kind of approach that students often feel moved to a kind of eloquence which, as our colleague pointed out, had not been there in their literary critical writing. Isn't this an important gain in its own right?

A footnote on "ideology"

It will be obvious that we have only made a start here in this complex field. Because the word "ideology" is used in more than one sense in current discussions, it is worth pointing carefully to what we have done, and what we (and others) have still left unfinished or untouched.

We have focussed here on what is probably the simplest and most accessible use of the concept - on consciously committed poetry, and especially satirical criticism and protest about political and social mores. This kind of poetry, deeply rooted in many cultural traditions, questions the "natural" assumptions about politics, religion, race, gender, class ...

Incidentally, we have also touched on a second use of the concept: the way that examination traditions unconsciously select, and exclude, certain kinds of texts and certain ways of responding to them. This is a much broader process than we have been able to illustrate. Why, for instance, did the student not ask herself about the role of the male vicar visiting

the ninety year-old woman? Why is that taken for granted (even by the poet?). What exactly was the poet getting at with so specific a reference to "3000 guineas' worth of property?" And so on.

The production, selection and publication of texts - including those specially designed for schools - offers silent testimony of ideological forces at work in a society. Thus, in our own case, although we have represented the work of female and male students roughly in equality, we note in retrospect that we considered four poems written by men - and none by women. In contemporary society that could be an unconscious ideological statement.

The tradition in which we grew up, and which still prevails at O and A level, paid little attention, if any, to such questions. African students used to be typically brought up on Tennyson; working class students on a great tradition exclusively representing the perspectives of middle and upper classes; set texts were from the "British" heritage ... And the signs of change are still slow.

Issues such as these are now being discussed by active minorities in higher education, at NATE conferences, and in local groups. There is a transformation still to be achieved in the thrust of literary criticism in schools.

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PART IV

Questions on Poetry Anthologies

For our final seminar we reviewed 27 poetry questions set in 1985 by AEB, JMB, Oxford and the West Midlands/ Cambridge. These revealed two well-nigh contradictory positions. In the first, which formed the mainstream, the students are expected to consider general statements about a corpus of poems, a genre, or even poetry as a whole:

> Ballads are --
> Poetry is --
> A good story deals with --
> The main characteristics of X's poetry are --
> Explain how poem X is typical of poet Y in general.

The clear demand is to generalise about poetic texts, in a quasi-argumentative form, using any quotation they can remember (in the circumstances) simply to illustrate their generalisations. All this on unprepared questions, in 35 minutes or so. The effects on both student and poem can easily be imagined.

Even more outrageous, in our view, were some of the actual generalisations students were supposed to argue for or against:

> Ballads are gloomy.
> Ballads are plain, bare and dull.
> Poetry is fun.
> A good story [deals] with human passions set against an appropriate background.

How can young students deal with statements that are so trite, naive and peripheral?

In this tradition, the student's own attributes, opinions and beliefs are excluded. Instead the requirement is:

> Describe ... the various attitudes [to war] adopted by the poets.
> Say what comment the poet is making [on aspects of modern life].

Apparently the student is to be politically neutered. This is in line with other assumptions that, apparently, all readers must agree with:

> Tennyson paints memorable pictures ...
> Nature is presented memorably ...
> The supernatural is convincingly presented ...

If you disagree, the questions exclude you.

Breaking through, against this mainstream, there is an alternative position. This begins by asking the students to choose - to "choose a poem" they found "satisfying", "effective", "rewarding", "simple" or "difficult", offering "different points of view" ... They were asked to "discuss" this poem, to say how it "affected you", how it may have had "effects on your attitudes". They are invited to "give your opinion on the ideas" in the chosen poem(s).

There are two conflicting ideologies represented here, which the exam boards do not appear even to be conscious of. Will things change with the new 16+ reforms, and the demand for positive achievements at each grade level? Will students leave school wanting to go on reading poetry and listening to it?

Coda

The traditional ways of examining poetry at 16+ are sterile and outmoded - of this we have no doubt. But much course work, we have found, is still tied to that

tradition. What is to be done? We are heartened to find that teachers and examiners working on the Cambridge Plain Text syllabus have found alternative approaches that clearly liberate a range of students, even in exam conditions. Wherever schools continue to use Literature exam papers in the new GCSE, we urge them, therefore, to discuss with examiners the kinds of changes in guidelines and time provision that are essential.

Equally, as we have tried to show, course work itself may have something to learn from a selective study of the best exam practices. Departments or teachers who still are not used to the freedom it offers can gain a lot by asking their students to collaborate in experiments such as we have outlined, and inviting them to say what forms of prompts and guidance they find most helpful.

Of course, so far as course work in Literature is concerned there is a further stage, too, which we have not documented here. This would involve students choosing their own poems, making oral presentation to the class perhaps, and in the light of (group) discussions or of reflections in a personal journal, developing a more independent form of response. This is a process that moves beyond the exam format altogether, and a long-term goal for all course work, we believe. Meanwhile, let us start at least to elicit responses that are personal, committed, exploratory and honest - it would be a breakthrough, for the students and for standards in assessment!

* * * *

REFERENCES

(1) See Louise Rosenblatt "The Reader, The Text & The Poem" (Southern Illinois University 1978) for a discussion of "text" and "poem".

(2) For an analysis of the "presenting consciousness" see Horst Ruthrof, "The Reader's Construction of Narrative" (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981).

(3) For a further discussion of this idea see Dorothy & Douglas Barnes "Cherishing Private Souls" in "Timely Voices" ed Roslyn Arnold (O.U.P. Australia 1983).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are very grateful to Vernon Scannel and his publishers, Allison & Busby, for permission to reproduce his poem "Incendiary"; and to Adrian Mitchell and the same publishers for permission to reproduce "Open Day at Porton" from his book "For Beauty Douglas"; and to R.S. Thomas and his publishers, Grafton Books, for permission to reproduce "Ninetieth Birthday" from his book "Tares".

Our thanks to Jane Ogborn and the Cambridge Board for permission to reproduce the material from the GCE O Level Plain Text examination.

We are especially indebted in this booklet to the students of Holy Trinity School, Crawley; Woolmer Hill School, Haslemere, Surrey; and Oxford College of Further Education, Oxfordshire. May their advice - and honest responses - be heeded by all examiners!

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If you find these ideas useful, we would be very pleased to have feedback from you and your students. We'd be equally glad to hear about problems, additions and modifications you would like to suggest.

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